

DAYS TO REMEMBER

Thesis

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ABSTRACT

DAYS TO REMEMBER

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Days to Remember is a collection of related short stories, through which one of the main characters tries to impart a life lesson to his grown son just before death. The first and last pieces of this collection are set in the present and the five middle pieces are flashbacks detailing episodes from the narrator's early life, specifically teenage into early adulthood.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Last Day.....	1
Day It Began.....	8
Day of Enlightenment.....	17
Day the World Changed.....	24
Day of No Quarter.....	32
Day of Reckoning.....	38
Day of New Beginning.....	45

“For some life lasts a short while, but the memories it holds last forever.”
Laura Swenson

The Last Day

Jim stands in the doorway of the kitchen, watching his mother hum a song while she washes some dishes.

“Hi Mom,” he finally says, stepping into the room.

“Jim! What an unexpected surprise,” she says, turning to look at her son. “What brings you to these neck of the woods?” she asks, brushing a few strands of light blond and silver gray hair off her forehead.

“Dad left a message on my machine,” Jim answers. He opens the fridge and pulls a can of Pepsi off the door. “Said it was kind of important we talked,” Jim tells her, raising the can to his mouth. “Any clue what’s up?”

His mother gives a small shrug of her shoulders and turns back toward the sink. “You know your father. Could be anything.”

“So, how’s he doing? Any better?”

“As he would say, he is. Stubborn mule won’t go to the doctor, so its hard to tell, but . . .” she pauses, looks at the lilies sitting in the window behind the sink, and begins to cry softly. “I’m worried Jim.”

Jim crosses the blue and white-checkered linoleum in two quick steps and puts his arms around her. “It’ll be okay, mom,” Jim says, kissing her on the forehead. “I’ll go talk to him. He in the den?” She nods, looking up at him with tears in her eyes. He reassuringly squeezes her shoulder and turns to go.

“Jim. I know he may not have shown it very well, but he does love you very much.”

“I know Mom,” Jim replies, and forces a smile before leaving the kitchen.

Walking down the stairs, Jim glances at the old pictures hanging on the wall. He pauses at the bottom of the stairs and looks over his shoulder at a family portrait. A low sigh escapes as he thinks about how that picture was the last time he could remember him and his parents all smiling at the same time. Taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, Jim turns to the door to his left, raises his hand, pauses for a brief moment, and then knocks.

"Come in," Jim hears through the door.

He turns the knob and gently pushes the door open. As he walks in, Jim looks around the dimly lit room. Everything looks exactly as it always did. The floor-to-ceiling bookshelves along the walls hold hundreds of books of every kind, from small paperbacks to oversized leather bound texts that look like they are a hundred years old. His father's desk, off to the left side of the room, is buried under scattered pieces of paper, old notebooks, open books, a beat up old typewriter and a small, one-bulb lamp. On the other side of the room, by the fireplace, is the worn-out and threadbare recliner where his father sat.

"Hey Jim, good to see you." Motioning to the chair across from him, his father says, "Come on in. Have a seat."

"How are you dad?" Jim asks as he walks across the room. "How you feeling?"

The fireplace gives off the only light on this side of the room. The gray hairs in his father's beard and on his head pick up the red and orange glow of the crackling flames, mixing with the few remaining dark brown hairs, making a rusty color. His father always did love to sit by the fire. That's why he said he enjoyed the cold months of

winter, so he could enjoy a nice roaring fire. Even in the dim light, Jim can see his father looks as old and worn-out as the chair he sits in, with wrinkles on his forehead and cheeks like deep scars.

"Ahh, I am. Same old same old. You know how it is."

"Yeah, that's what mom said. She also said you won't go see the doctor."

"Doctors. All they can tell me is what I already know."

"And what's that? Mom's really getting worried, you know."

"Yeah, I know," Jim's father says looking down at the wool blanket covering his lap. "I'm dying Jim. I don't have much time left."

"Dad, come on. You've been saying that as far back as I can remember."

"Well its true. From the minute we're born we start dying. I'm just a lot closer than some people."

"You talk like this around mom? No wonder she's worried."

"Nah, I try not to talk to your mom about this stuff," he says shifting slightly in his seat. "She's never been philosophical. Never really thinking about a lot of stuff. Ahh, but, anyway."

"So, that's what you wanted to tell me? That you're dying?" Jim asks doubtfully.

"That, and I need you to do something for me. Jim, I know I may not have been the best father. . ."

"Dad, growing up was like living with a history teacher," Jim interrupts. "You were always talking about 'History repeating itself' and how this and that was similar to what happened in Rome or Greece or Ancient Europe or China or some other place."

"Well, its true, dammit! History always does repeat itself, and if we forget what happened before, we'll live through it all over again," he says in frustration.

Both men sit looking at each other for a few seconds, until Jim finally turns his head toward the fireplace.

"Jim, I know I may not have said this often enough, but, I have always loved you and have always been very proud of you."

Jim looked back at his father, opened his mouth to say something, but no words escaped his lips.

"You know that, don't you son?" his father asks.

"I know dad," Jim says softly, trying to nonchalantly wipe the growing tear out his eye.

"It was something I should have told you a lot more. And I 'm sorry I didn't until now."

"At least you said it," Jim says with a smile and soft chuckle. "So, what do you need?"

"There are some things I want you to hear. No one knows what I'm about to tell you, not even your mom, but I don't have a choice anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Couple of minutes ago you said I treated you like a student, always trying to teach you something, right?"

"Yeah?"

“Well, I’ve got one last lesson to pass on to you Jim. The lesson of true immortality.”

“What?”

“Do you remember the story I once told you about Ponce de Leon? How he spent his life looking for the fountain of youth?”

“Yeah,” Jim said. “I remember you calling him a moronic jackass. But dad you’re losing me here. What does you thinking some old Spaniard was a idiot have to do with”

“A lesson about immortality?” his father finishes. “Just hear me out Jim. Growing up, I never had a lot of friends in school. But I always loved playing basketball. I could never wait to get over to the courts a couple of blocks from your grandparents house. I’d get home from school, run in the house, grab the first t-shirt and shorts I could find, dirty or clean, it didn’t matter, and was out the door. I always looked like an absolute mess when I got over there.”

“You never told me about that,” Jim said with curiosity. “But dad, I’m sorry, I still don’t see the point.”

“You know son,” his father replies, “memory is a funny thing. Some things you think you’ll remember forever, but forget in a heartbeat. Others, you can pray you’ll forget, but never will. And its those things, people, places, whatever, whatever you can’t forget even if you try, its those things that are immortal. Those things live on, forever.”

“Did I ever tell you how, when I was a kid playing ball at those courts near my house, the guys called me Messy?”

“No. Wait, what guys?”

“Yeah, they always called me Messy back then . . .”

“I have always believed that all things depended upon Fortune,
and nothing upon ourselves.”

George Gordon Byron

Day It Began

"Mess! Mess!" Dre yelled as he broke free of his man and made a cut to the basket.

I faked to my right, did a crossover dribble going the other way, and made a quick bounce pass with my left hand, hitting Dre's hands in mid-stride. In one step, Dre jumped up and dunked the ball.

"Game!" I yelled as the ball bounced off the asphalt. Dre swung from the rim like a kid on monkey bars for a second. He dropped to the ground, laughing out loud.

"Hey Messy," Dre said. "Pretty good pass for a white boy.

"Yeah?" I replied. "Well that was a pretty slick move you made, for a homie dat is."

We laughed as we walked over to shake our opponents' hands. Me and Dre were both thirteen, but standing side by side, we looked like complete opposites. I was nearly a foot taller than Dre; but, where Dre was rock solid, chiseled muscle, I was pretty chubby. And, while I usually had a big, goofy grin on my face that made me look like I was ten, Dre looked kind of mean, with a scar running down the length of his right cheek that he got in a bicycle accident a few years before I met him. We had been best friends for almost a year and were nearly inseparable, especially on the basketball court.

"Nice game guys," I said to the two guys we had just beat. "Up for a rematch?"

"Nah," one of them answered. "We gotta get goin. See ya guys lader."

"Yeah," Dre replied. "See ya."

“Well brotha,” I said, watching the two walk away, “howsa bout a little one on one to kill some time?”

“Sure, tons of fun,” Dre said with a smirk. “I’d be happy to whoop yo ass.”

“Whateva son. Let’s go.”

We played for nearly half an hour, neither of us winning or losing, because we never bothered to keep score. That match had been going on for almost our entire friendship and was never finished. We were so caught up in the game, we didn’t notice three older boys walking toward us from the other side of the courts.

“Well, well!” the largest of the three said loudly. “Whadda we got here? Couple a little shitheads think they’re ballers, huh?”

I caught the ball as it dropped through the chain-link net and looked over Dre’s shoulder. “Aw shit,” I muttered under my breath. A sneer spread across Dre’s face as he turned to look at the three new guys on the court.

“Hey, its Mikey Puertoguese!” Dre said loudly, with exaggerated happiness.

“What brings you round here?”

“You know damn well why I’m here, fuck,” Puertoguese spat at Dre.

Not many people called him Puertoguese to his face, unless they wanted to piss him off. His mother was Portuguese and his father was Puerto Rican, and he hated his father, and, maybe even more so, any reference to him. I stepped past Dre, stopping not quite between him and Puertoguese.

“C’mon now,” I said. “This don’t have ta happen.”

“Fuck you, punk,” Puertoguese yelled, turning his attention to me. “That piece a shit messed round with my sister. And now I’m gonna mess round with his face.”

“Ya sista didn’t seem to mind,” Dre said.

Before the last word slipped past his teeth, things went from bad to worse as Puertoguese took a run at Dre. I met him halfway with a fist to the side of his head. Puertoguese groaned as he dropped to one knee. In the time it took me to shake my hand in pain, Dre and Puertoguese’s boys came together almost right on top of where me and Puertoguese. Dre tried to kick Puertoguese in the face, but he moved and Dre’s foot connected with his shoulder, knocking Puertoguese to the pavement, but not causing much damage.

The taller of Puertoguese’s boys punched me in the stomach while the third guy hit Dre in the back of the head, making him kiss the asphalt. I tried to stand up straight, only to be greeted with a fist to my jaw. As my head snapped to the right, I spat out a thin line of blood. Puertoguese was on his feet by now, joining his friends in beating me and Dre. Out of the corner of my eye I could see one of Puertoguese’s boys pulling Dre to his knees. Before I could move, I got kicked in the ribs and curled up in pain..

“Always gotta be the tough guy, huh Dre?” Puertoguese said, as he threw his fist into the side of Dre’s head.

“He don’t look tough now,” the taller of Puertoguese’s guys said with a deep-throated laugh.

“Looks more like a bitch,” the other guy sneered.

“Yeah,” Puertoguese said. “A little bitch.”

Puertoguese and his boys never noticed the three guys coming up behind them. One of the new guys smacked Puertoguese's taller boy in the back of the head as he was about to kick me again. Another grabbed Puertoguese and put him in a headlock.

"What the fuck?" Puertoguese's other boy said, startled and spinning around.

When he looked at the third new guy, his eyes showed sudden shock and realization and then looked like they were going to pop out of his head. His mouth moved, but no words came, until he managed to stammer out, "Gr, Gr, Green Man."

"I think you need ta get outta here now," the third new guy said. Without hesitating Puertoguese's boy turned and ran off the court. Green Man watched the guy run away before turning and looking at Puertoguese. "Whadda you doin, Mikey?"

Puertoguese strained against the arm holding him, but the headlock only got tighter around his neck. He gagged and coughed, then looked at Green Man.

"This ain't none o' yo business Green Man, " Puertoguese managed to cough out.

"Well, looks like I made it my business, now don't it?" Green Man replied, pulling down his sunglasses to show just a little of his eyes.

By now I had managed to lift myself onto one knee. Tilting my head up, I got my first good look Green Man. He was tall, probably six five, maybe six six. His skin looked as black as a midnight sky. His eyes grabbed me and held me for what seemed like an eternity when looked over at me. I tried to look away but couldn't. I was scared stiff, only thinking about what I had heard about Green Man being a real mean bastard.

"You okay?" Green Man asked me.

I could only nod in response.

Turning back to Puertoguese, he said "Ok Mikey. You ain't gonna bother these guys no more. Are you?"

"Kiss my . . ." Puertoguese started to say, before the arm around his neck tightened again.

He paused to suck in some air before saying, "Nah, I won't fuck with them no more."

"Yeah, that's what I thought you'd say," Green Man said. "Awight Bird, go ahead let 'em go."

The guy holding Puertoguese relaxed the grip on his neck and gave him a light shove, forcing him forward a couple of steps. Puertoguese stopped himself and began rubbing his neck. The third of the new guys pulled Puertoguese's boy up off the asphalt and pushed him toward Puertoguese. Puertoguese turned and looked at Dre, who was just getting up from the last punch he took.

"Is there something else, Mikey?" Green Man asked.

"Nah, nuttin else Green Man," Puertoguese answered, his eyes locked on Dre in an icy stare.

"Well then. Its about time you and your friend here left, don't you think," Green Man said. Puertoguese nodded, lightly smacked his friend on the shoulder, and the two walked off the court. As they were leaving, Green Man stepped over to Dre and helped him to his feet.

"You okay man?" Green Man asked.

"I'll be awight," Dre replied, flexing his jaw. "Nuttin broken, I think."

"What was that all about?" the guy Green Man had called Bird asked.

I remembered hearing that Bird was Green Man's best buddy. I also heard he hated all white people, except Larry Bird. He used to say he had to give Larry Bird respect for his skills on the court.

"That was nuttin," I said. "Just a little sumtin ta do with Dre gettin on with Puertoguese's sister. Seems it pissed him off."

"No shit," the third guy, Huck, said.

Huck was Bird's younger brother. I heard people called him Huck because his favorite book was *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. That, or it was the only book he ever finished. I never really did find out for sure.

"Understandable though," Huck continued. "If I had a sister, it'd probably piss me off too."

"We only kissed. But one of his buddies told the asshole a different story to start some shit," Dre said, trying to clarify things.

"Whateva," Green Man said. "Its over now."

"By the look on Puertoguese's face, don't seem like he thinks things is over," Dre said.

"Don't worry bout that little shit no more," Bird said

"Hey, why'd you guys jump in like that?" I asked. "Had nuttin to do wit you?"

"Well," Huck answered, "let's just say, it seemed like you boys needed some help. So, we helped."

"Don't worry bout it man," Green Man said, staring at me. He said, "I can see in your eyes you think there's some catch, but there ain't. Scouts honor."

“Shit, brotha,” Bird said as he started to laugh. “If yous a boy scout I’m a white boy.”

Huck and Green Man laughed, while Dre and me just stood there, glancing at each other, not sure what to do.

“Fuck you punk,” Green Man responded. “What’s your boys’ names anyway? My name’s . . .”

“Green Man,” I finished. “We heard of you. Never seen you round here before though.”

“I’m Dre, and this is Messy.”

“Well, Dre, Messy, nice to meetcha,” Green Man replied. “The two monkeys behind me are Bird and his younger brother Huck. We were over yonder,” he said as he turned and pointed up the street, “waitin on our boy T-Dog to show up when we saw this goin down.”

“Speakin of,” Huck said looking around. “Where the hell is that fucker?”

“Asshole’s probably been getting in some sorta shit he’ll need us to get him out of” Bird said, not quite hiding a growl from his throat.

“Cool it Bird,” Green Man said. “Hey man, that your ball over there?”

“Yeah,” Dre answered.

“Well hell,” Bird said loudly to no one in particular. “Let’s getta game goin. Foul shots for teams. Who’s up for it?”

“I’m in,” Huck said.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, still a little hesitant.

“Nah, I’ll sit this one out. Think I’ll just sit and catch my wind,” Dre said, heading over to the side of the court.

“Well, all right,” Green Man said. “First two to sink one run together.”

Bird and Huck drained their first shots and started against me and Green Man. We played for hours, stopping only to let Dre sub in. We never kept track of the score. By the time the streetlights started to flicker on with a dull, droning buzz, T-Dog had shown up and joined the game. When we finally called it quits, the sun was gone, the stars were out, and we looked like a tight crew that had been together for years, like it was fate, and meant to be.

“The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it.”
William James

Day of Enlightenment

“Goddamn him,” I hollered, slamming Green Man’s apartment door shut. “He can go to hell for all I care.”

“Whoa, settle down,” Green Man said, looking up from his chair. “What happened?”

“My dad. That asshole,” I said, pacing back and forth across the room. “He was givin me shit again. Wants to know when I’m gonna stop doin nuttin but hanging out and playin ball, and get a job for da summer, and choose which fuckin schools to ply to for college, and more, and more, and just piling the shit on. I damn near lost it man.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled before starting again, “I mean, dammit. He treats me like I’m a little fuckin kid. I’m fuckin seventeen for chrissakes, not a fuckin baby.”

“Messy, in his eyes you are a kid,” Green Man said. “You’re his son. He’s only looking to make sure you’re okay, man. That’s all. It’s his job to give ya shit, Mess.”

Green Man leaned forward and took a half-crushed pack of Marlboro Menthols out of his shirt pocket. He held the pack to his lips, and pulled a cigarette out with his teeth. Green Man lit his cigarette and offered the pack to me.

“Well,” I replied, turning down the offer with a shake of my head, “he don’t have to enjoy the job so damn much, does he?”

Green Man took a drag off the cigarette in his right hand and, eyes closed, rubbed his forehead. He opened his eyes and looked at me as I sat down on the couch across from him. I exhaled a deep breath and looked toward the living room window.

“Mess, I’m thinking its one of the few parent-perks. Shit man. Afta the dirty diapers, an all the shit they put up with, there hasta be some kinda up side to being a parent. Right? Maybe fuckin with their kids’ heads is their bonus.”

Green Man held a serious look on his face for a second but then lost it. We both started to laugh out loud. After a brief moment of hard laughing, I wiped the beginnings of a tear from my eye.

“So what if it is what god gives ‘em to be happy,” I said in between laughs. “My old man is so fuckin old, how the hell’d he know what’s goin down nowadays to give me shit bout nutin?”

“C’mon, you smarter than that Mess. The more things seem to change in our lives, the more things stay the same as they’ve always been. Your dad knows a lot more than you’re giving him credit for.”

“I don’t know,” I said, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly, calming down from his fit of laughter.

“Mess, I’d be willin to bet that your dad’s been right where you are now.”

“Bullshit,” I said excitedly. “No way my dad’s been to your place.” After a short pause, I nervously asked, “He hasn’t, has he Green?”

“Jesus, I didn’t mean literally Mess,” Green Man said, laughing. “Some days I think that, even knowin you’re smart and all, you may be hopeless Mess.”

“Fuck you,” I replied with obvious regained calm. “What the hell’d ya mean then?”

“Mess, you ever read? I mean like poetry and books and stuff? Not just the damn comics and sports in the paper?”

“Yeah, sometimes. For school.”

“Well, its like this poem my gramma read me one day. Hold on a sec, I think its round here somewheres.”

Green Man stood up, walked over to the closet, pulled out a couple of small cardboard boxes, and started rustling through the papers and notebooks inside.

“Here it is,” Green Man said standing up. He walked back and sat down next to Messy. He started to read the piece of wrinkled paper silently.

“Well?” I asked. “Do I get to hear it?”

“Oh, sorry. Hey, lets go over to the park. There’s this spot I found the other day. Nice little hill. Whadda ya say?”

“Yeah, why not.”

About five minutes later, Green Man and I were standing on top of a small hill overlooking the majority of the park. The sun was starting to set and the sky had a touch of a rose colored glow. Green Man sat down in the grass facing toward the sun. I stayed standing and looked down at him.

“You feelin okay Green?” I asked, a grin slowly creeping over my face. “I mean, you ain’t turning fag or something on me are ya? What’s wit comin out here to read a poem?”

“Aw, shut the fuck up and cop a squat wouldya,” Green Man said motioning for me to sit next to him. As I sat down, he pulled the poem out of his pants pocket.

“The first time my grandma read me this poem, she brought me out to hill just like this. So, I figure we should do the same. Awight? Ya little punk. Now, grandma, she never told me who wrote this, she just had it.”

“Well, let’s hear it already,” I said impatiently.

“Shit, ain’t you got no appreciation for nuttin? You in rush to get home or sumthin?”

“Guess not.”

“Jesus Christ. Try to do sumtin nice, right. All I gets is shit,” Green Man said. He took a breath, looked at Messy, then at the poem, cleared his throat, and started to read outloud:

Run to the clearing in the woods
 And sit and rest beside rocks,
 Links to creation, symbols of eternity,
 Sit and commune with the wind,
 The breath of the gods,
 Listen to the spirit of the woods,
 The spirit of the earth and life,
 Hear his tale, old as time itself
 “The world goes round in circles,
 Life spins in cycles through the ages,
 One age dies,
 Giving birth to the new,
 The old age takes its sins and evils,
 Gone but never completely forgotten,
 Leaving behind only stories of the past,
 Myths and fairytales for the future,
 The new age begins fresh with power,
 With magic renewed, just as the age before,
 Repeating forever, the only question is
 Who will see the New world and
 Who will leave with the past sins to become
 The demons of dreams.
 Only time will tell.”
 The day passes, life turns slowly,

Slipping further along its journey,
Treetops ignite like candles
As the sun melts into the horizon,
No longer day, but not yet night,
New colors of purple, red, and orange,
Fill the sky
As a soft breeze blows,
Gently caressing the brow, stirring back to the world,
Where has the time gone?

I sat looking at Green Man, still as a stone, for a second before saying, "Cool."

"Yeah. Ya think so?" Green Man asked. "Whadda ya think it means?"

"Ah, well, it means, umm, ah" I hesitated. I scratched the top of my head and finally answered, "awight I got no clue."

Green Man chuckled and shifted so he was leaning backward, propping himself up with his elbows. I looked over at him feeling annoyed.

"What's so funny, fucker?" I snapped. "Whadda you think it means?"

"Since ya asked," Green Man started, "I think its talking bout what we leave behind us when we're gone."

"Huh?"

"Ya know, like, ahh, like, like diggin up dinosaur bones. That kinda shit. Stuff that lets us figure out what happened in the past. Some kinda mark for the people who come later to find."

"Oh," I said, still a bit unsure. "So, kinda like carvin ya initials on a desk, knowin soona or lader somebody's gonna see 'em, and know ya sat there once. That it?"

"Yeah, Mess," Green Man answered with a chuckle. "Sumtin like that."

"So," I started to ask, "what's this gotta do wit my dad being a prick?"

“Well, its like you carvin initials on ya desk. You’re ya dad’s mark that he’s leavin behind. He’s leavin part of himself behind, in you, so he’s remembered. So somebody can see his initials.”

“I think I see what ya mean.”

“You’re his immortality, Mess.”

“Say what? What da fucks that mean? Now I’m confused.”

“Its this idea I read bout in this philosophical book one time. The idea is that the only real immortality people can get is to be remembered afta they’s dead?”

“So, that’s why dad’s bein a punk?”

“Maybe. Maybe you’ll getta do the same thing wit your kids. And, if ya teach ‘em right, maybe they remember you and yo dad. And then they’ll teach their kids about you and so on. You’ll be immortal forever Mess.”

I sat there, staring at the sunset, thinking.

“I dunno, Green. Sounds pretty weird man.”

“Well,” Green Man said with a shrug. “I didn’t say it was right. Just said its an idea.”

Day the World Changed

Only four left. That thought kept replaying in my head about a thousand times a minute. Sitting on the marble steps out in front of the school, waiting to be picked up, I kept asking myself how the world could turn to shit so fast. A couple days ago there were six of us. Then, in what seemed like a second, two were gone. Forever. Only four left. The squeal of overused brakes snapped me out of my thoughts.

"It's about goddamn time," I said as Huck opened the car door.

"Shut the hell up and get in the car," Huck said, slamming the door shut behind me when I climbed in the back.

"Jesus Messy," Dre said from the other side of the backseat. "You smell foul, man?"

"Who I got to impress?" I replied, shrugging my shoulders. "Besides, I changed my shirt and pants didn't I."

"Change a clothes don't help much unless ya shower brotha," Huck said, mockingly covering his nose with his hand.

"Whatever," I mumbled in response.

Leaning my head against the window as Bird pulled out of the parking lot, I looked over at the basketball court and my mind drifted off, not concerned with where we were headed right then. My thoughts kept finding their way back to what happened on a couple of days ago.

Saturday had started off normal. It was a nice summer afternoon, with the sun shining and a slight breeze that felt great against my face. Like always, I had gone to the courts to meet up with the guys to shoot some hoops. T-Dog hadn't shown up yet, so the

rest of us played some two on two. A couple more guys showed up so we got a full court game going. We'd been playing for about a half an hour when this guy named Cracker walked onto the court with a few of his boys.

"Hey! Get the fuck of my court," Cracker yelled. "We're playing here."

"Kiss my ass Cracker," Green Man said, holding the ball against his hip "This ain't your court. We were playin here first and we'll leave when we're done."

Everybody on the court froze. Nobody ever talked shit to Cracker. He was always messed up on drugs, hated everybody, and would shoot anybody faster than you could blink, for no reason at all. But Cracker really hated Green Man, because Green Man never seemed to care about him. He just always ignored Cracker whenever he was around. Surprisingly, Cracker didn't do anything. He just stared at Green Man with eyes like daggers sharp enough to cut a man clean in half. Time seemed tom stand still until suddenly Cracker spoke.

"Okay, Green," Cracker snarled. "You enjoy ya game. Fir now."

Cracker turned and walked off the court. When he had gone around the corner, everyone let out the breath they had been holding in. After waiting a couple of minutes to make sure Cracker wasn't coming right back, we went back to playing the game.

About twenty minutes later, the game was almost over. We were playing to twenty-one, and the guys and me were up twenty to nineteen. The other team brought the ball up the court. One of them took a jump shot from the top of the key, but Bird blocked it. Huck came up with the ball and passed it to me as I started up the court. I went five or

six steps, saw Green Man breaking along the other sideline, and made a long pass that he caught in mid-stride.

Just as he started to dribble, the sound of tires screeching and an engine racing turned my head. I saw Cracker's car squealing around the corner. Sunlight glinted off the gun that was aimed out the window. Everyone jumped on the ground as quick as possible; everybody except Green Man. He had taken two steps after catching the pass, jumped up, and dunked for the win. As his feet hit the asphalt, four shots rang out, making the loudest noise I ever heard in my life.

Looking up from the pavement, I watched as, in what seemed like slow motion, Green Man took one bullet in the stomach and two in the chest, forcing him backward a couple of steps, and a fourth in the shoulder that spun him around. It seemed to last forever, as he crumbled to the ground like an empty sack. He just laid there, his blood seeping out of his body and spreading out over the asphalt. The only sound I could hear was Cracker's car going down the street.

I half-stumbled, half-crawled my way over to Green Man, not wanting to believe what I had seen. I knelt next to him and pulled him to me. I slapped him in the face like I hoped he was only unconscious. Taking my hands away, I saw they were covered in Green Man's blood, which warm and sticky against my skin. All I could do was kneel there, looking down at my friend. Bird came over and pulled me to my feet.

"Come on Mess," Bird said pushing me toward the car. "We gotta get outta here!"

We left. You could hear the sirens in the distance, and we couldn't be there when the cops showed up. There would be too many questions and, besides, they wouldn't really do anything anyway.

A little while later, we were at Bird's place. I was sitting in the corner of his living room with my knees pulled tight to my chest. Huck and Dre sat on the couch. The three of us just sat and stared off into space, not moving a muscle. Bird was on the phone. His face showed no sign of emotion, but his voice hinted at the anger and pain he was feeling.

"You sure he ain't there?" Bird asked loudly. "Well make sure to tell him to getta holda me soon as he shows up? Yeah. Thanks."

Bird slammed the phone onto the receiver. "Fuck! T-Dog ain't there neither. Where the fuck is that crazy bastard?"

"Prably showed up at the court, saw all the shit and took off till things cooled down," Huck suggested.

"Yeah," Bird said. "Maybe."

Something about Bird's voice told me he was really worried about not being able to get a hold of T-Dog. I couldn't hold onto the thought for very long though. The image of Green Man lying on the asphalt kept pushing every other thought from my mind. Along with that image, was the realization that my life was never going to be the same again.

"Hey," I heard Bird say, coupled with a shove of my shoulder. "We're there Mess."

"Mess has a point. It don't seem right," Huck said.

"What don't?" Bird asked.

"Us bein here," Huck answered. "Alive I mean. Why's Green Man the one whose dead, huh? Why not any of us? And why'd T-Dog have to die too? This shit ain't right Bird?"

"You know damn well why T-Dog's dead!" Bird screamed. "He fucked up! He helped Cracker get Green Man, so fuck him! I hope the mother fucker rots in hell!"

No one said anything for a moment. We all just stood around Green Man's grave. Finally, Huck wiped away the tears in his eyes, cleared his throat, and began to say a prayer.

"God. Look after our brother, Green Man. He was the best man among us. He was truly a good person, a good soul. Don't judge by any wrongs he may have done, but rather judge him by his acts of kindness and love. Take him into your arms and comfort him. For now, and for all eternity."

"Amen," we all said together.

I put my hand on Huck's shoulder and squeezed. Dre made the sign of the cross. Bird pulled out a crucifix from underneath his shirt and kissed it. Again, we stood in silence for a moment. It was Bird who broke the silence this time.

"Goodbye Green Man. We'll never forget you."

And, with those words, we left our friend. No one said anything as we walked back to the car. No one talked during the car ride home, either. That ride seemed to last

forever. It was just passed sunset when we pulled up outside my house. Bird took a deep breath and looked up into the rearview mirror.

“Messy. Me, Huck and Dre are going after Cracker tomorrow,” Bird said. He paused, then finished, “And I don’t want you going with us.”

“Bullshit I’m not going!” I said. “Green Man was my boy to remember.”

“Yeah. But you got too much to lose.” Bird said. “You’re going to college in the fall. You got a chance none of us have. You can get out of here for good. Green Man wouldn’t want you to get caught up in this shit.” Bird paused for a second before adding, “And neither do I.”

“I don’t give a shit what you want,” I snapped. “I’m going with you.”

Bird didn’t say anything, just sat there looking at me in the mirror for a moment. “Fine. But you’re not getting out of the car,” Bird grumbled over his shoulder. “Meet us out front of the school tomorrow at noon.”

I got out and went inside. I didn’t sleep at all that night.

“Because there’s a conflict in every human heart, between the rational and the irrational, between good and evil, and good does not always triumph. Sometimes, the dark side overcomes what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature.”

Apocalypse Now

Day of No Quarter

"You sure ya ain't seen 'im?" Bird asked, impatiently. "Awight, well, can ya make sure to tell him to get a holda Bird if he shows up? Yeah. Thanks."

Bird slammed the phone onto the receiver and yelled, "Fuckin A! T-Dog ain't there neither. Where the fuck is that crazy bastard?"

"He prably saw all the cops down at the court and took off, not wantin to deal wit it," Huck suggested.

"Yeah, maybe," Bird said sounding unconvinced.

"He'll turn up eventually," Huck said. "For now, I say we all just calm down. Sort shit out later."

"Goddamnit!" Bird screamed, picking up the small coffee table in front of him and flipping it over. "What the fucks to sort out, huh? We go after Cracker. Done."

"Cool it Bird," Dre said from the couch.

"Dre's right bro," Huck added. "Goin off half cocked ain't gonna solve shit. We ain't got as many guns or guys as Cracker. Plus, if the cops decide to pull their head out their ass, they'll be comin round to ask some questions. Cracker'll get his, but we gotta use our heads right now." Huck glanced over at me, sitting in the corner of the room with my knees pulled to chest. "Let's get Messy and Dre home and we'll worry about finding T-Dog tomorrow."

I don't remember the ride at all. I kept seeing the Green Man's body in my arms the whole time.

The next morning we met up and went looking for T-Dog. We started with his usual spots, first going to the Dairy Queen where he sold pot to kids from the high school

across the street, but there was no sign of him there. After that, we went to the bowling alley he hung out at because the guy would serve him. The bartender there said he hadn't seen T-Dog in a couple of days. Around noon we ran into T-Dog's girlfriend as she was leaving her apartment building.

"Hey, Maria," Huck called out as she walked down the street. "Maria!"

She turned around, kind of startled, like she was scared. "Oh, its you guys."

"Maria, we're looking for T-Dog. You seen him?" Huck asked.

"Nah. Not today," she answered, looking worried. "Why? What's up?"

"You ain't heard?" Bird snapped. "Cracker took out Green Man yestaday."

"What!" she cried. "Oh my god! No, no! I knew sumtin bad was gonna happen."

Turning to look at Huck she continued. "I'm sorry. I swear to God I'm sorry."

"Maria," Huck said, taking hold of her shoulders. "Calm down, okay. Where would he be?"

"No. Don't hurt him, please. I tried to find out what happened, but he wouldn't tell me. He couldn't have known. Please, don't hurt him," Maria begged, visibly shaking.

"What the fuck you talking bout?" Bird asked. "Where's T-Dog? What the fuck did he do?"

"Oh god, please," Maria cried again, looking at Huck.

"Maria," Huck said loudly. "Tell us what happened."

"It was a couple of nights ago. On Thursday. T showed up at my place lookin like somebody nearly beat him to death, all bruised up and bleedin. He said Cracker had done it. Sumtin about a bag a shit-weed T sold to one o' Cracker boys. Cracker caught up to

him by the school, by the Dairy Queen. He worked T over bad. T said sumtin bout Cracker sayin he was gonna kill T, and then come and get me too, if T didn't help him wit sumtin. Sumtin bout seein Green Man."

"What!" Bird yelled, stepping toward her. "What about Green Man? What did T do? Dammit bitch, wha'd he do?"

"T wouldn't tell me no more than that. I swear," Maria cried. "T didn't know he was gonna kill him. I swear."

"Fuck! Fuck!" Bird yelled, kicking over a garbage can.

Dre grabbed Bird, trying to keep him under control. Huck just stood there in disbelief. I felt sick in the stomach like I was going to throw up. Not only had one of my best friends died the day before, but now it turned out one of my other friends helped set him up. My vision got blurry as tears welled up in my eyes. Then, I heard Bird's voice. He sounded angry, but wasn't yelling anymore.

"Where is he?" Bird asked, his voice cracking like he was thirteen and hitting puberty.

Maria was hugging herself, trying to stop shaking, but didn't answer.

"Where!" Bird yelled.

She whispered, "He's staying across town. At his aunt's house."

Bird pulled away from Dre, turned, and walked toward the car without saying a word. Dre and me looked at each other, not sure what to do. Huck turned and headed after Bird, so we followed them over to the car.

"Bird, whatta ya doin?" Huck asked as he reached the car door.

“I’m goin over there. I’m gonna drag the mother fucker out of that house and I’m gonna kill him. You wanna come, fine. You don’t, fine. But you ain’t gonna stop me,” Bird said as he opened the car door and climbed in. Huck opened the passenger door as me and Dre got there. All three of us climbed in.

It took us about an hour to find T-Dog’s aunt’s house. Bird parked the car about a block down the street. Sitting in the backseat, I was scared, almost to the point of shaking. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen when Huck turned toward Bird. Bird didn’t say anything, just leaned forward, reached underneath his seat, and pulled out a .45.

“This is messed up,” Huck said. “Where the fuck ya getta gun from?”

Bird didn’t respond. He just sat there staring at the house. It seemed like we sat there forever when T-Dog came out. He looked up and down the street, like he was scoping things out. He must not have noticed the car, because he started walking right toward it. When he got about ten feet from the car, Bird got out. T-Dog made eye contact with Bird. They stared at each other for a long minute. Even through the window, I could tell Maria hadn’t exaggerated how badly Cracker had beat him.

Suddenly T-Dog turned and bolted back up the street. Bird took off after him. The rest of us scrambled to get out of the car and chased after them. T-Dog didn’t stop at his aunt’s house. Instead, he went past it and turned down an alley running in between some houses a few doors down. By the time me, Huck, and Dre turned into the alley, they were half way down it. Bird caught up to him when T-Dog tripped over a bag of garbage.

When we got there, Bird was beating him like there was no tomorrow, putting new bruises on top of the one's Cracker made, punching him in the face, knocking him onto the ground, and kicking him in the stomach. Bird stopped suddenly, bent down, grabbed T-Dog by the back of the neck, pulled him off the ground and threw him up against the chain-link fence that ran the length of the alley. He pulled his gun out from his pant waist and pressed the tip to T-Dog's forehead. The three of us stood there frozen, not wanting to believe what we were seeing.

"T-Dog, give me one reason not to do this. Please," Bird said softly.

T-Dog didn't say anything. He just stood there, blood dripping down his cheek from a reopened gash above his eye.

"Bird," Huck said softly. "Don't do this."

Bird relaxed his grip on T-Dog's shoulder and slowly started to pull the gun away from his head. Unexpectedly, T-Dog pushed Bird and ran down the alley. Bird spun and, without hesitation, squeezed off three shots, all of which hit T-Dog in the back. He dropped like a stone, face first onto the pavement. Bird stood there, looking at T-Dog's still body lying on the ground, then turned and started walking back up the alley. As he walked past us, I saw tears in his eyes, the first and only time I ever saw Bird cry. Not knowing what else to do, we followed Bird and got back in the car and drove off. Nobody said a word.

“Death is the only inescapable, unavoidable, sure things. We are sentenced to die the day we’re born.”

Gary Mark Gilmore

Day of Reckoning

"Hey, wake up!" Bird yelled in through the car door window. "Dre's back."

Startled, I looked around not knowing where I was for a second, but quickly realized I was in the backseat of Bird's car. Forcing my eyes to focus on the front windshield, I saw Dre walking toward the car.

"Remember," Bird said opening the door and climbing into the front seat. "Wait a couple of minutes for us to get around the corner, then pull the car out in front of the building. Be ready to take off when we come out, cuz, if we fuck up they'll be right behind us." I nodded me head and climbed over the front seat as he got out of the car.

"Yeah, he's there," I heard Dre say to Bird. "He's gotta bout four of his boys with 'im."

"Ok," Bird replied. Looking at Dre, he asked, "You ready?"

Dre nodded slowly. Bird turned to Huck, who pushed away from the alley wall he and stepped toward Bird and Dre.

"Lets go," Bird said.

I watched them head down the alley. When they got to the end of the, I started the car. I waited about another thirty seconds, shifted into drive, and rolled forward. As I got to the end of the alley, I paused before turning onto the street and looked out the passenger door window and saw Dre, gun in hand, slip in behind Bird and Huck through the door to the pool hall Cracker always hung out at. I parked the car about thirty feet down the block from the door. Leaving the car running, I sat and waited for what seemed like forever, but was really only a few minutes.

"What the hell's taking so long," I said allowed.

Just then, gunshots broke up the silence of the calm afternoon. My head jerked back and forth between looking at the door of the building and looking up the street. There were no other cars in sight and nobody walking on the sidewalk.

“C’mon, c’mon,” I said impatiently, tapping my fingers against the steering wheel urgently.

Glancing up the street, I saw a cop car turning onto the street, heading in my direction. Trying to decide whether to sit tight and hope the cop would just keep driving or if I should get the hell out of there, I started to bite my left thumb nail. Suddenly, the decision was made for me.

The door of the pool hall slammed open and Huck stumbled out, walking backward, trying to keep his balance. He was holding a gun in his left hand, clutching the same shoulder with his right. He was staring at the door and didn’t see the cop car skid to a stop, or see the two cops jump out. For a second, it seemed like he didn’t even hear the cop shouting, “Freeze asshole! Drop the gun! Drop it!”

Huck slowly started to turn. For a brief moment, Huck paused and our eyes met. I saw his mouth moving and realized he was telling me to go. Huck finished turning around and faced the cop. He bent down to put his gun on the sidewalk as I put the car into reverse and tried to pull away from the scene as inconspicuously as I could. That’s when Cracker and one of his boys came running out of the hall with guns raised, ready to shoot.

The second cop fired before Cracker could get off a shot, but the bullet hit the wall to Cracker’s right while he ducked to the left. Cracker’s boy fired at the first cop, but

missed, so he ran down the street toward me. By the time he turned down the alley, the first cop had jumped back in the car and was driving after him.

Looking back at the door, I saw the other cop standing in the street, while Huck lay face down on the sidewalk. I couldn't tell from where I was whether he was alive or dead. The cop yelled, "Get up slowly."

Who the cop was talking too, I couldn't tell at first. Then I saw Cracker stand up. He had both of his hands raised in the air, with his gun in his left.

"Drop the gun, and put your hands behind your head," the cop said.

Cracker slowly started to lean forward like he was going to put the gun down, when he jerked his arm forward in quick movement fired. The cop returned fire, but missed as he fell to the ground. Cracker didn't wait around, taking off up the street. I hesitated a moment, watching Cracker disappear around a corner about a block up. I got out of the car and ran to the cop. He was breathing, but his eyes were closed. Cracker's shot hit him in the side of the stomach.

I went to check on Huck. Standing over his body, it was like I was standing over Green Man all over again. I knelt down and rolled Huck onto his back. The front of his shirt was blood-stained, but the only wound I could see was in his shoulder. He was alive, but unconscious. I went back to the cop, picked up his walkie-talkie, and fiddled with the buttons and knobs until I heard someone's voice.

"There's an officer who's been shot and another person who's also been wounded," I told the voice. "Their outside Duffy's pool hall on West Fifth. Send an ambulance quick."

I dropped the walkie talkie on the ground next to the cop and went back over to Huck. Kneeling down next to him, I said. "Don't worry Huck. You're gonna be okay. Help's comin man. Help's comin."

I stayed until I heard sirens about a block away. Hating myself for every step I took, I got back in the car and drove away, not knowing how to deal with the cops, not knowing how answer their questions.

About two weeks later I got a letter in the mail from Huck.

"Hey Mess, how's it goin? Bet you didn't know I could write did ya. Anyway, I don't know if you heard about my trial, but it was a fuckin joke. It didn't even last ten minutes. The judge found me guilty of 'multiple murder' and sentenced me to life with no chance for parole. I know about Bird and Dre, so ya don't have to tell me. I saw both of them get it inside the pool hall. Have ya heard anything about Cracker? Is he still around?"

I thought about it, but decided not to write back and tell him they hadn't caught the asshole. It would probably kill him to hear Cracker was still around somewhere. Looking back at the letter, I continued reading:

"Well, I'm sure I'll hear about it sooner or later. Anyway, Mess, I want ya to know, ya shouldn't feel guilty about driving off. Staying wouldn't have changed anything. Don't feel too bad for me neither. The time won't be so bad. Don't worry about me. You just worry about doing good at school. I know I was never really one to talk much about how I was feelin, but I gotta tell ya I'm happy and proud that you're leaving. Also, I know he never said anything, but Bird was proud of ya too. Don't believe that shit

about him hating all white boys on the court. He was full of it. Well, I should get goin now. Do me favor one day? Go float down a long, lazy river one day and write me about it. Give me sumtin to dream of. See ya. Peace.”

A month later, I had my car packed and was ready to go off to Ohio for school. Before leaving the only world I had ever known, I stopped at a mailbox and sent Huck a package, with a copy of *Huckleberry Finn* and a postcard of the Mississippi river inside. On the back of the postcard, I simply wrote, “You’ll always be with me.”

After I graduated from college, I looked around the Midwest for a job, but didn’t find anything I liked, so I came back home. I had been bumming around for a month or two, doing odd jobs for people here and there, but nothing real serious. Then, one day, George, a guy I knew from before I went away to school, looked me up and asked if I was interested in meeting him for lunch. We met up at a deli and talked for a while, catching up on old times.

“So Mess, whatcha ya been doin for work?” George eventually asked. “Got anything regular? Anything ya couldn’t blow off for a day or two?”

“Nah, nuttin regular. Just some odds and ends, here and there. Why?”

“Wouldya be interested in helping me out wit a job?”

“Maybe,” I said hesitantly. “What is it?”

George worked mainly as a small-time package guy and number-runner for a bigger guy out on Long Island who was supposed to be connected to the mob. Needless to say I wasn’t sure what kind of work he had in mind.

“Nothing big,” George replied. “My boss wants me to take a ride down to Atlantic City to check on sumtin for him.”

“And what might that sumtin be, George?”

“This guy. He owed boss some dough. But when the time came to pay up, the punk skipped town. Boss got word the guy went to Jersey to hide out for awhile. But, parently, this guy ain’t real smart, cuz he got in some shit wit the boys down there and got whacked.”

“So, if the guy’s takin care of, what’s ya boss wantcha ta do?”

“He just wants to make sure it’s the right fuckin’ guy they snagged.”

“So, what the hell ya need me to tag along for?”

“Well, I thought ya might be interested. The guy who got whacked down in Jersey is supposedly that fuck head Cracker,” George said. “I remembered ya havin some trouble with him a few years back. Thought ya might want to see if its him. I’m not positive, but the description sure as hell sounds like him.”

I stared at George for a second, not knowing what to say. A feeling of pain and hate that I had pushed away for years flooded my senses.

“Well, Mess? Ya wanna go or what?”

“What time are you leaving?”

From down the street, church bells started ringing . . .

“The only thing you take with you when you’re gone is what you leave behind.”
John Allston

Day of New Beginning

“In nomine patris, et filii, et spiritus sancti,” the priest’s voice echoes throughout the church, as he makes the sign of the cross in the air from behind the altar.

“Amen,” everyone says in unison.

While everyone else sits down, Jim remains standing, awaiting the nod from the priest, which comes shortly after everyone has been seated. Jim steps out from the pew and walks up the marble steps at the front of the church. Stepping behind the podium, Jim takes a couple of pieces of paper out of his suit coat pocket. He smooths the pages and takes a drink from the glass of water provided for the speakers. He scans over the words he has written down, while the people remain quite, unmoving. Jim raises his right hand to his face and wipes his eyes, trying to get rid of the sting of incense smoke. Finally, Jim looks out over the church. From his mother and sisters and wife and children in the first pew, to his father’s friends from work standing along the back wall, Jim slowly looks at everyone’s face. His eyes finally make their way back to the front of the church where his father’s coffin is located. Clearing his throat, Jim begins.

“Thank you all for joining us on this solemn occasion. My father always loved history and things of the past. One day when I was a child, I asked my father why he liked to read books so much. He told me that he wanted to make sure somebody remembered all the old stuff from the past. He said those things were too valuable to lose. So I asked him, how could anyone lose them if they were in books. He said that whether or not they were in books, as soon as people forget about them, they become lost and

might never be found. But, as long as they were remembered, they would always be alive.”

“Over the years my father definitely had a lot of lessons to pass on to me. And, I have probably forgotten many of those lessons. And the lesson he tried to get me to understand about the books he read was one I let slip away from me. Probably because I didn’t really understand what he was really trying to tell me, until a couple of days ago, when. . .” Jim pauses, trying to hold back a wave of emotion. Looking up at the ceiling, he takes a deep breath and continues.

“It was when I saw my father for the last time that I finally learned the lesson he’d started so many years ago. It was during this last visit, while I sat by the fireplace in the den and listened to him tell me stories of the past, like I had when I was a child, that I finally understood. The stories he told me that day were not tales of fallen empires, kings, or wars, like so many others. These stories were about his own past.”

“And it was through these stories that he got me to understand the most important lesson he had to share. The reason why those people who have been searching throughout recorded history, in various lands and times and ways, for the key to immortality, to never-ending existence, failed was because they were searching for the wrong kind of immortality. They were searching for a physical immortality. And, my father helped me understand that the immortality they should have been searching for, and that many found without realizing it, was the immortality of memory.”

“Someone cannot be truly gone from our lives if we remember them. And, it is within our memories that those who have passed away shall not age, shall not grow sick,

and shall not feel pain. Our friends and family may be taken away from us in the flesh. But, so long as we remember them, they will live on forever. And its through those who remember them that they leave mark for coming generations to discover.

“We should not mourn too greatly for those who pass from this life. They have moved on to a new life. We should celebrate and honor the lives they lived, and we should rejoice in the new journey they have begun. Still, we should always keep a place in our hearts and minds for their memory. We should grant them immortality.”

Having finished, Jim waits for a moment, looking out over everyone, then he steps out from behind the podium and walks back down the marble steps. Just as he gets to the pew, he hears the priest stand up and say, “Please rise, and join in singing the recessional hymn, ‘Amazing Grace.’”

Although he stands up with everyone else, Jim doesn’t sing. Instead, Jim looks down at the boy standing next to him, and thinks about what he wants his son to remember.